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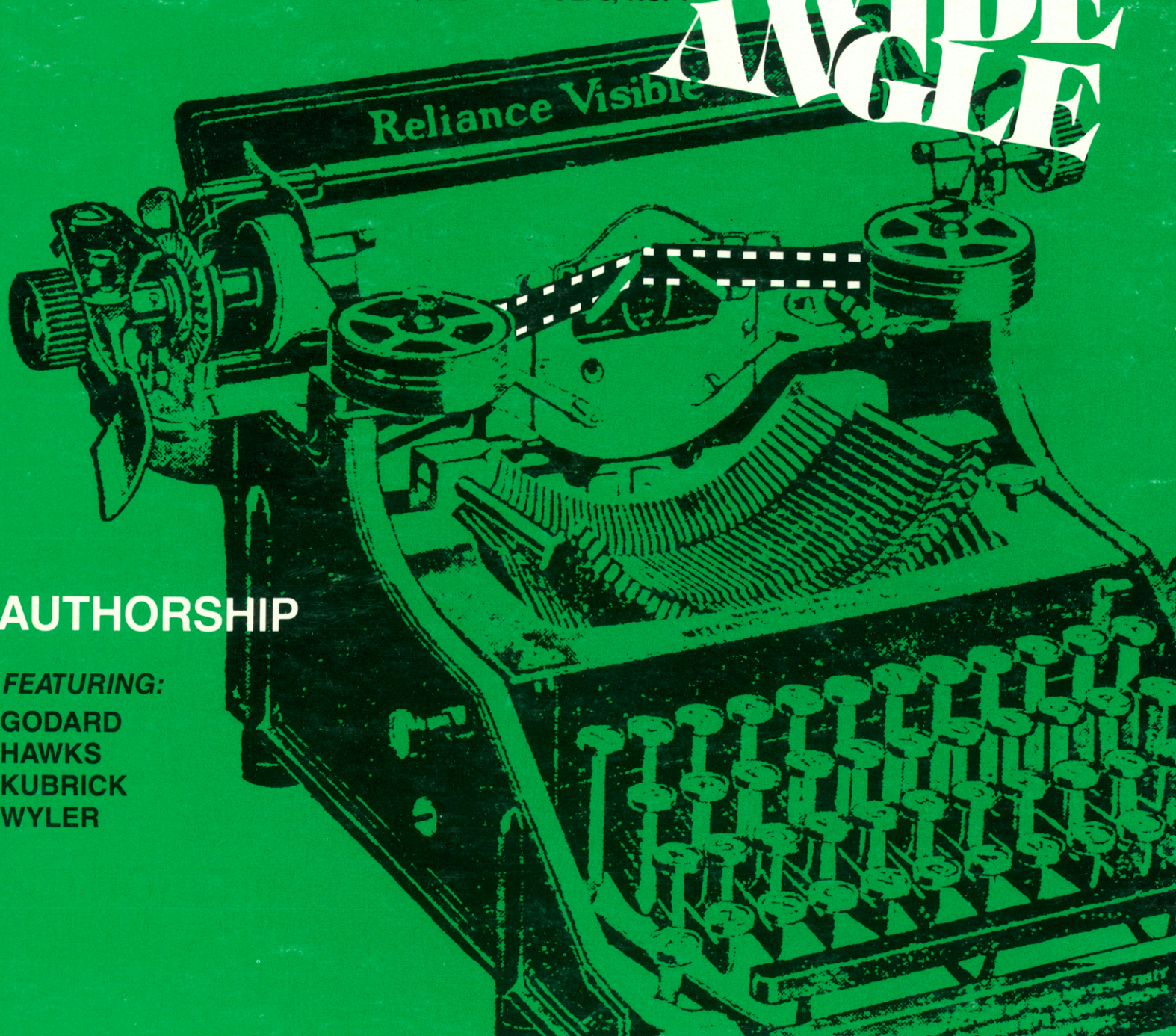

AUTHORSHIP

FEATURING:

GODARD
HAWKS
KUBRICK
WYLER

AND JUMP CUTS BLIND SPOTS

By David Bordwell

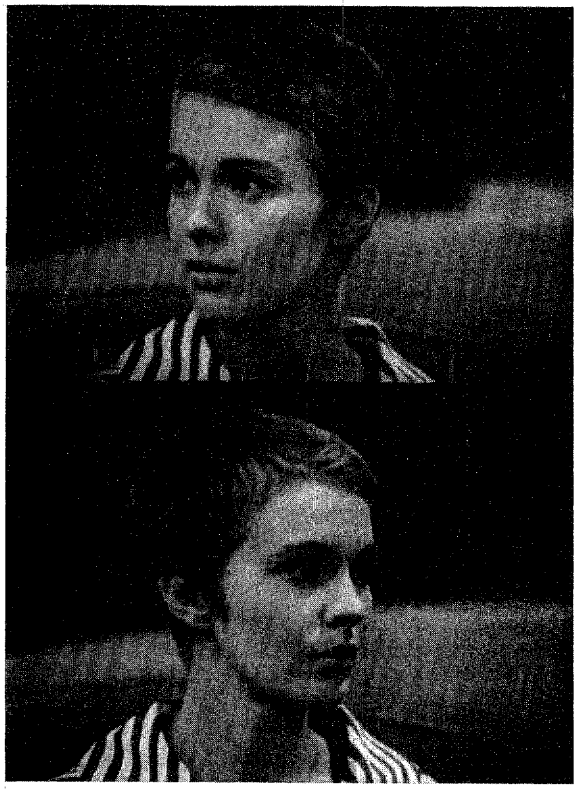

Figure 1

Studying the history of cinematic forms and styles remains one of the most pressing tasks facing film scholarship. At an early point in this enterprise, we must forget about auteurs and examine enormous bodies of ordinary (even bad) films.[1] At some other point, though, we must bring auteurs back. For one thing, no stylistic history of any medium can avoid discussing individual agents who behave as if they were wholly self-directing. To some degree auteurs are in error, but that does not change the historical significance--the functions and effects--of their belief. And there is another reason we cannot do without them. In various modes of film practice, "authors" are named and elaborated by particular circumstances. At certain historical moments, positing a creator for a film becomes relevant to filmmaking, viewing and criticism.[2] Authors are social constructs, but like other social constructs they have a history and exercise real power.

In the domain of film form and style, it seems likely that viewers and critics will be able to spot stylistic effects if a mental set of "authorship" is already in place. The history of art in the twentieth century has been dominated by conceptions of individual expressivity and uniqueness of technique; naming creators has been a necessary step in differentiating styles. A historical poetics of film will have then to examine the role played by critics' discourse in establishing authorship as a pertinent category for the cinema. If we take a simple but uncommon stylistic device, we can see how it became identified and analyzed only after changes within the cinematic institution were able to link it to conceptions of the author--author as the source of the film, as unique creative temperament and as the "narrator" of the film. My examples will be confined to English-language criticism.

Often, any bit of disjunctive or discontinuous editing is called a jump cut; the term is even applied to abrupt transitions between scenes. There are historical reasons

for this broad and ambiguous usage, and I will suggest some later. For immediate purposes, I shall be using the term in a narrow sense. The jump cut is easier to define with respect to production than to perception. In filming and editing, you can create a jump cut in several ways. You can stop the camera and change some element of the filmed event before resuming. You can chop frames out of a shot. Or you can splice together two takes of the same action from apparently similar camera positions. A paradigmatic example of a jump cut is shown in Fig. 1.

How can we describe how a jump cut looks on the screen? The jump cut presupposes a diegetic world; it is not an abstract graphic device. The most important criteria are *continuity of viewpoint* and *discontinuity of duration*. The two shots joined by the jump cut are from identical or almost identical vantage points. As a result, many elements of the shot remain identical across the cut, while other elements shift instantly in position, scale or aspect. It might be convenient to distinguish "figure" jump cuts (Fig. 1) from "ground" jump cuts (Fig. 2), depending upon which shifts. We should also note that a camera movement can be broken by jump cuts; the *gradual* change of angle or distance present in any camera movement still supplies a vantage point sufficiently continuous to register the instant shifts of elements within the visual field. (Fig. 3 shows a pan shot broken by a jump cut.)

Along with the stability of vantage point, the jump cut creates a temporal ellipsis. The change we observe in some elements of the visual field is produced by omitting some stretch of time. Thus the jump cut can set up a disparity between story duration (how long it would take to change position in the diegesis) and plot duration (the instantaneous change on the screen). Note, though, that not every cut that creates a temporal ellipsis constitutes an instance of a jump cut. For example, the cut in Fig. 4 does skip over the time it takes the cops to cross the lobby, but the two shots do not have the continuity of vantage point that would make them jump cuts. It is this stable point of view that distinguishes the jump cut from other sorts of editing discontinuity.

In the commercial fictional cinema, the jump cut emerged as a figure of style at three historical moments. It was present very soon after the invention of cinema, in the fantastical films of Georges Méliès and others. Méliès' magical transformations usually rely upon the figure jump cut; the background remains constant while an actor or object vanishes, reappears at another

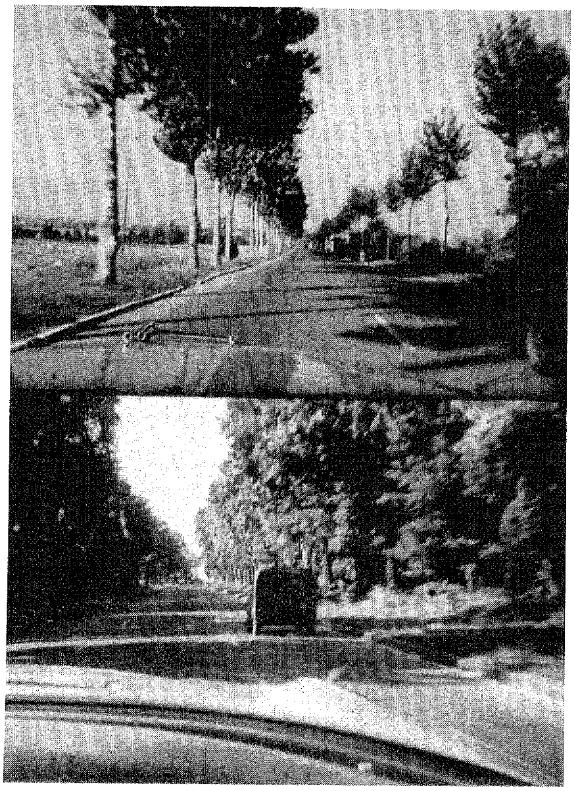

Figure 2

spot, or transmogrofies. The jump cut reappeared in the Soviet montage cinema of the 1920s; nearly every significant director employed it at some point in his work. Even Pudovkin, normally considered the most conservative of Soviet montage directors, used jump cuts plentifully. Finally, the jump cut reappeared thirty years later in films of the French New Wave. The device can be found in works of Malle and Truffaut, but it is principally identified with Godard and particularly *A bout de souffle* (1960); Figs. 1-3 illustrate the film's use of the jump cut.

Now, in principle, the jump cut is a fairly disruptive device. It assaults basic principles of continuity editing, confuses us about the placement of figures and violates continuity of duration. Furthermore the jump cut can call attention to the singularity of the camera's viewing position; since our point of view hasn't changed but the diegetic world has, we become, if only momentarily, aware of what Brecht called the "unique perspec-

tive" of the film shot. Yet if the jump cut is one of the most perceptible cuts one can make, there remains a puzzle: why has this cut been scarcely noticed, let alone discussed, by film reviewers, critics, historians and theorists? Not until 1960 did film viewers and critics explicitly recognize the jump cut as a stylistic option. This sixty-year blind spot is worth measuring, I think, not only to fill in a patch of the history of film style but also to show how a stylistic figure became graspable through a shift in the frames of reference deployed by filmmaking and film criticism.

In general, we can say that the recognition of any stylistic figure depends on at least four factors. First, there is the sheer noticeability of the factor in perceptual and cognitive terms. From this standpoint we could generate a typology of stronger and weaker jump cuts. Secondly, the film as a whole can assign a more or less prominent role to the figure. Once in a while you can find a jump cut in a Hollywood film. For example, if someone walks out of a long shot and, after an interval, somebody else enters, a little footage left out may betray itself by a slight shift in the background. But plainly the film's context works to make us overlook the jump. Thirdly, the recognizability of a stylistic device depends upon the state of the norms of filmmaking at any given moment. Conventions of genre and film style, canonized approaches to the rendition of space or time or narrative situations, will govern whether one can spot and analyze the device. For example, if most cuts in most films were jump cuts, then a straight continuity cut might be recognized as a peculiar device. Finally, recognizing a stylistic figure also depends upon the analytical categories and strategies available to film discourse at a given moment. Film criticism, theory and reviewing create a body of viewing protocols. These conventions bring out only certain aspects of film structure and style and allow other aspects to go unnoticed. It seems evident that psychophysical perceptibility, the film's unique context, the current norms of filmmaking, and the body of analytical conventions are all subject to a variety of historical pressures--aesthetic, economic and ideological.

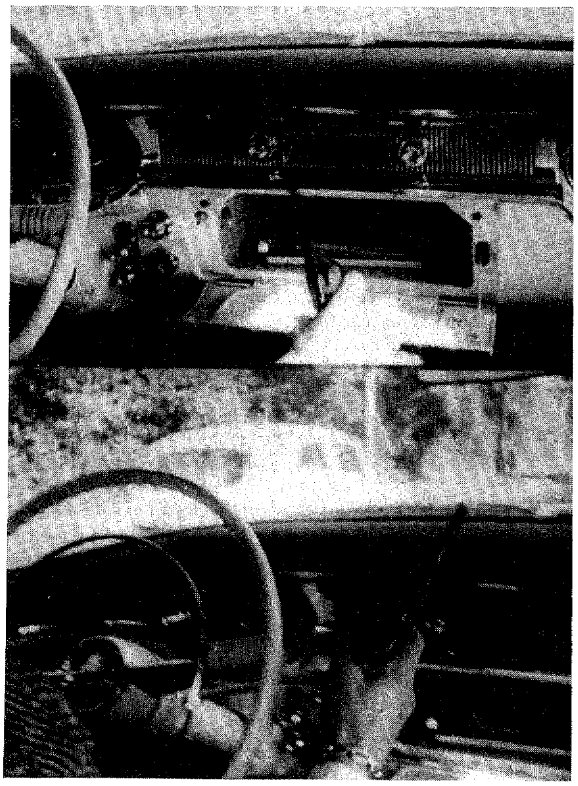

Figure 3

The recognizability of jump cuts in Méliès' films offers a good example of how the four factors interact. Perceptually, these films furnish quite strong figure jumps but the cinematic norms of the period forced such cuts into specific functions. Obviously these jump cuts are motivated by genre: because of the fantastical narrative situations, the jumps we see are not attributed to a change of shot at all. We grasp the jumps as a change within a diegetic world where normal laws of physics do not obtain. This motivation is reinforced by cues in the mise-en-scene, such as characters who gesture magically to induce transformations. Moreover, the very concept of a cut of any kind was not part of contemporary norms of filmmaking or film criticism. There was *splicing*, to be sure, but the idea of a cut--an interruption of a diegetic view, the assembly of the represented scene out of an assemblage of fragments--was not to become a norm of filmmaking for some years. The analytical categories of criticism lagged even farther behind; even after filmmakers had intuitively grasped the concept of the cut, editing played no part in critical discourse for several years.[3]

Méliès' trick-film transformations are fairly evident cases. But the Soviet filmmakers' use of jump cuts is much more complex. Plainly, jump cuts like those in

the sabre dance in Pudovkin's *Storm Over Asia* (1928) (Fig. 5) were at some brute level perceptible to every spectator. And they cannot be motivated generically; we can posit no mystical transformation of one sword-dancer into another. Furthermore, by 1925, the state of film style was such that continuity editing was the norm throughout Europe and the United States. Why then did these jump cuts go unremarked by critics?

In any historical account, it is always hard to say why something did *not* happen, but we can hazard some likely causes. In isolation, a cut like that in Fig. 5 is striking, but if we sketch in pertinent contexts, it stands out much less. There is a rhythmic context: Soviet films are normally cut much faster than are other films of the period. *Storm Over Asia*, for instance, has an average shot length of only 2.5 seconds. The increase in the number of cuts makes it less likely that any particular shot change, even a jump cut, will be noticed. Furthermore, the Soviet montage style foregrounds discontinuity and this could make a jump cut less noticeable than it might otherwise be. A Soviet montage film plays extensively with time and space. In this context, the jump cut, which tends to keep some continuity of figure or ground and of viewing position, might paradoxically seem less disorienting than other cuts we encounter. In sum, a rapid editing tempo and a high incidence of discontinuities could tone down the shock of the jump cut.

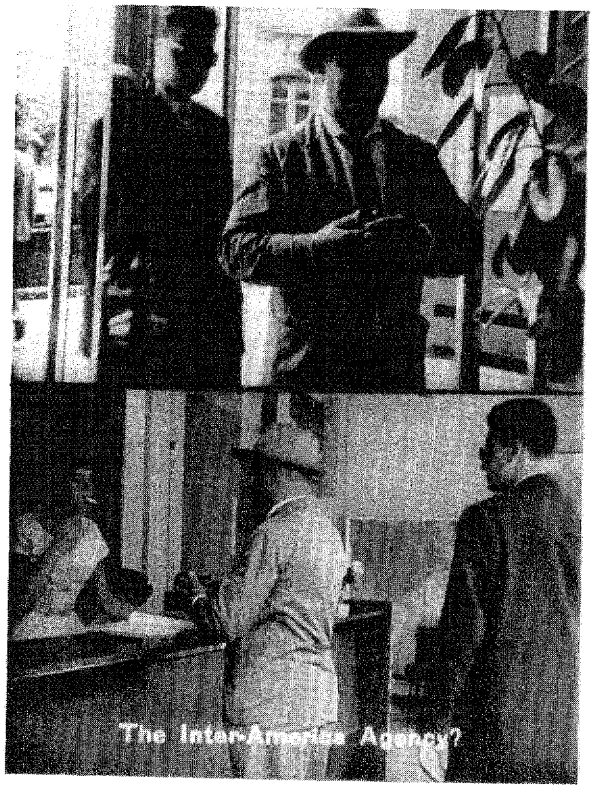

Figure 4

More interesting for our present purpose is the disparity between filmmaking norms and critical categories. Throughout the 1920s, the Soviet directors had dissected, with a degree of self-consciousness that is almost without equal even today, certain basic factors of film construction and style. By 1930, Kuleshov, Pudovkin, Timoshenko, Vasiliev and several other practitioners had published detailed books on the theory of montage, and Eisenstein had written several of his most important articles. While these writings make no mention of jump cuts, they do introduce what had been missing from Méliès' period: a conceptual analysis of film editing. But these ideas took some time to affect critical writing in Europe, England and America.

"Montage" in the Soviet sense was not common currency in English before 1929. Most often it was conceived simply as editing, as in this typical definition: "Cutting film into separate units and reassembling them in a given order."[4] The Soviet films which began to reach England and America in the late 1920s were widely reviewed in the popular press and in little magazines, but the films' editing was almost never discussed.[5] Normally, critics perceived Soviet montage only as a vaguely sensed visual rhythm. Of *Potemkin* (1925): "There is a sort of purr to this picture as it is unfurled,"[6] *October* (1928) errs by "breaking our attention too short, of not letting us look long enough."[7] Other critical categories superceded that of editing. The first, most obviously, was the category of "propaganda." Whatever the critic's own political position, a concept of didactic filmmaking became the central strategy for comprehending such films. Technique could then be overlooked altogether or simply cited as an instrument for intensifying the propaganda effect. A second reigning critical category was that of realism. Peculiar as it may seem today, most critics described *Potemkin* (stone lions and all) or *Mother* (1926) as supremely realistic cinema. The use of nonactors, the absence of makeup, the filming of real locations, violence of an unprecedented explicitness and the tendency

to draw stories from history--all were far more important to Anglo-American reviewers than were editing experiments. There was thus a strong tendency to naturalize the films--to read through the style to the events and characters. The naturalization was at times drastic: Soviet films were frequently likened to documentaries. *The End of St. Petersburg* (1927) struck one reviewer as "a remarkable news reel of the Russian Revolution."[8] Very likely, the disjunctive editing style of the Soviet films could be put aside as a certain rough-hewn quality commensurate with the "documentary" quality of the images themselves.

THERE ARE ALSO INSTITUTIONAL REASONS WHY FILM CRITICISM FINALLY DISCOVERED THE JUMP CUT

On the whole, English-speaking critics became conscious of Soviet montage theory and of editing as a technique during the 1930s. Pudovkin's *Film Technique* was translated in 1929. At the same period, some of Eisenstein's essays began to appear in English and he was widely interviewed during his European tour and his sojourn in North America. Rotha's *The Film Till Now* (1930), Arnheim's *Film as Art* (translated 1933), Spottiswoode's *Grammar of the Film* (1935), Jacobs' *Ride of the American Film* (1939) and journals like *Experimental Cinema* show a growing awareness of what came to be called shots and editing. But by this time, of course, synchronized sound filmmaking had been introduced and the Soviet montage films were scarcely to be seen anywhere. The theoretical discourse tended to recast those films in people's minds so that one could discuss Pudovkin's films only by referring to what he or someone else had written about them.[9] In sum, by the time montage became a sufficiently available critical category, the films' historical immediacy was lost. "Montage" as a term was taken up by Hollywood filmmakers around 1934, used to designate something substantially different from Soviet practice. And since not even the Soviet directors had explicated their employment of jump cuts, no such term or concept circulated within film criticism.

If we move now to 1960, the third moment of the jump cut's insertion into commercial fictional cinema,

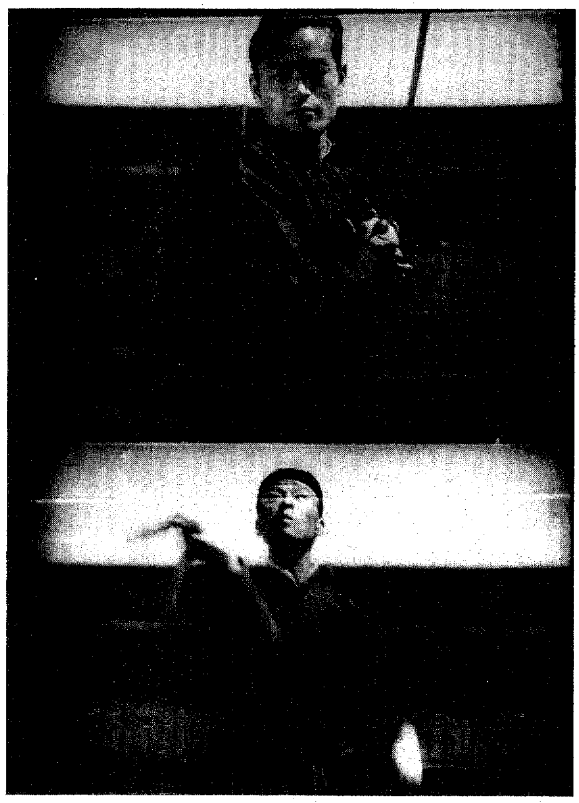

Figure 5

we can see again some specific formal circumstances governing its perception. Consider how *A bout de souffle* employs cutting as a technique. Whereas the Soviet montage films included many types of temporal discontinuity (ellipsis, overlapping, repetition), Godard's film makes use only of ellipsis. Here a discontinuous cut always signifies that on the visual track some time has been skipped: sometimes a great deal of time (Fig. 6), sometimes only a little (Fig. 7). In this film, visual time always moves forward, albeit in leaps. Moreover, *A bout de souffle* provides a great deal more spatial continuity than its Soviet predecessors: we are usually well-oriented to the overall space of the action. Add to this that the shots are on the average much longer (over eleven seconds) and that the jump cuts tend to occur in clusters of two or more, and we can see how on purely internal grounds the jump cut is foregrounded in *A bout de souffle*. Nevertheless, there are also institutional reasons for the fact that film criticism finally discovered the jump cut.

Throughout most of its history, the cinematic institution has produced "authors"--outstanding individuals to whom salient features of films could be attributed: producers like Selznick and Disney; directors like Griffith and Lubitsch; writers like Ben Hecht. To a limited degree, critical discourse distinguished among the Soviet directors in such ways: Eisenstein, the fiery intellectual; Pudovkin, the circumspect engineer; Dovzhenko, the gnomic lyricist. But it is not until the rise of an international "art cinema" in the 1950s that on a large scale there emerged a set of formal norms and viewing conventions for constructing the filmmaker as the source of the film's narration. I have discussed the norms of the art cinema elsewhere; here I want simply to emphasize that the films of Fellini, Bergman, Antonioni, Truffaut, et al. make several narrational assumptions.[10] The diegetic world of the film is to be seen as possessing a baseline of objective realism; on some plane, the viewer is asked to apply criteria of versimilitude to the action. Furthermore, the film is to be read as expressing psychological states of the characters--through their behavior or through explicit assignment of subjective point of view. The viewer is also expected to watch for the intrusion of the author, the filmmaker as narrator. Into this diegetic world of objective events and character subjectivity, the author steps, emphasizing some aspect by a symbolic framing, a bit of cutting, a significant camera movement. These three narrational systems--character subjectivity, objective verisimilitude and authorial commentary--circulate through the art film. The viewer is expected to note the shifts between narrational levels and to watch for ambiguous cases when we can't tell which is which.

While this mode of film practice was gaining strength, there grew up a body of writing answering to its needs. Classical film theory had no coherent concept of narration. In the 1950s, however, there emerged a theoretical and critical discourse which could supply such a theory. Etienne Souriau's circle at the Sorbonne proposed several terms (profilmic event, diegesis, spectatorial position) which led toward seeing film as a narrational activity. Astruc's conception of the *caméra-stylo*, Bazin's work on Welles and Renoir, and the *Cahiers du cinéma*'s auteurist policy signal, in somewhat different ways, a movement toward new viewing strategies matched to the growing international art cinema. Now a film was to be "read" as if it were a novel, both as the statement of an author with an identifiable style and as a discourse enveloping the characters. If the Soviet montage directors had been seen as slaves to

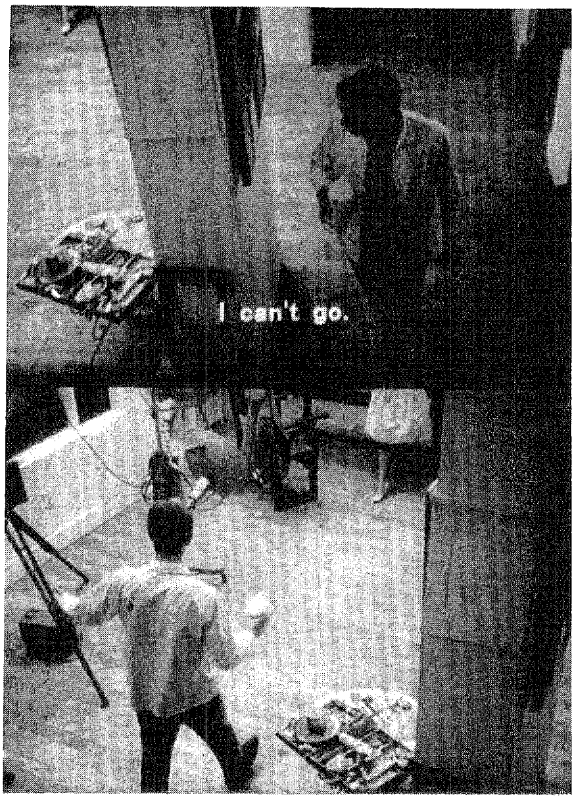

Figure 6

the impersonal needs of propaganda, the art-film director was seen as free to exercise individual expression. Cues for such authorial readings could be found in those flourishes with which the author embellished the diegetic world. We must not forget that at its inception auteur criticism was closely bound up with the emergence of the art cinema, and the most controversial moments in the history of that criticism involve the application of art-cinema interpretive conventions to films made outside that tradition (in particular, to Hollywood films). The way was paved for *A bout de souffle*: now, like other techniques, jump cuts could be *made to be seen*, to be read by viewers and critics in codifiable ways.

With *A bout de souffle*, "Godard" the author became a figure of the cinematic institution, and reviewers responded. *A bout de souffle* "establishes that he has a style of his own and a point of view."[11] "What is especially interesting is the original style that Godard

has devised to tell his story."[12] One component of this style was the jump cut and now critics noticed it. "The montage often skips like a needle on a record."[13] "Often there are cuts made within the same shot."[14] Some reviewers even called these disjunctions jump cuts. (The earliest usage of the term in print seems to be *Variety*'s 1960 review of *A bout de souffle*.[15]) Most important, the film's jump cuts were interpreted along now-familiar lines. There was, for instance, the appeal to character psychology. "At each cut the film jerks ahead with a syncopated impatience that aptly suggests and stresses the compulsive pace of the hero's doomward drive."[16] The cuts shift our attention "as abruptly as the young man himself loses interest in one matter and goes on to the next."[17] The film's style is thus "the style cultivated by Michel as an expression of impermissible masculine virtuosity."[18] The jump cuts were also naturalized as realism: they do not tell a story but render "a sensation or an experience with the kind of chances and hazards that intervene in life."[19] Alternatively, the jump cuts were read as Godard's own asides, his specific "tone of voice," his "personal signature, an index of his modernity," or his sheer virtuosity: "Godard tries more cinematic tricks than most moviemakers risk in an entire career."[20] The art cinema's canons of character subjectivity, verisimilitude, authorial presence and personal style engendered a criticism prepared to see films in these terms; the jump cut in *A bout de souffle* was suitable for all these funtions.[21]

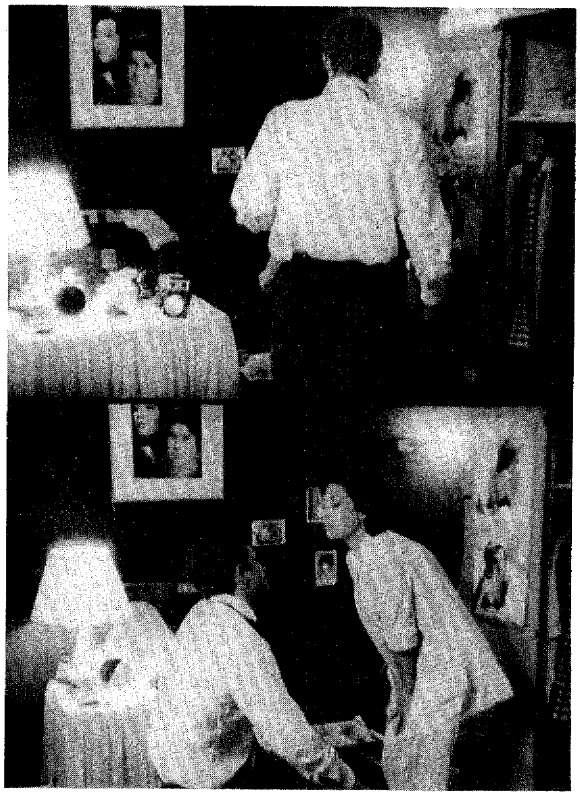

Figure 7

Just as Hollywood cinema eventually domesticated Soviet montage, so the norms of classical narrative filmmaking absorbed the jump cut in certain ways. We are now in a better position to historize the very ambiguity that we saw surrounding the term at the outset. Mainstream filmmaking generalized the concept of the jump cut to cover any unorthodox editing discontinuity. Film editor Avran Avakian tells of how in 1955 for the television film *Stravinsky* he cut together various shots of Stravinsky caught in different activities, times and moods: "In the process, I think I gave birth to the jump cut."[22] Ralph Rosenblum, editor of Woody Allen's films, writes of Godard that "he jumped characters from location to location without the slightest concern for the time-honored geography of cutting. . . . When he wanted to move Belmondo from his bedroom to the street across town where Jean Seberg is peddling the *Herald Tribune*, he simply cut from the bedroom to the street."[23] Jump cuts in the sense I have been considering here are of course anathema to mainstream filmmaking, but these editors' remarks show that Godard's film supplied a rationale for slightly expanding the range of permissible discontinuities (e.g., the elimination of dissolves between shifts of scene). We should also observe that classical narrative makes these discontinuities motivated by causality: Rosenblum claims that on network television one sees the cop put down the phone "and--zipp!--he's getting out of his car on the other side of town."[24] Godard might be amused to get the credit for the sort of narrational conciseness that one can find at least as far back as the silent films of Fritz Lang.

If mainstream narrative filmmaking has sought to tame the jump cut by redefining it, what of film criticism? In most instances, film critics have simply accepted the looser notion, thus effectively making the jump cut "invisible" again.[25] John Russell Taylor asserts that the New Wave's jump cuts enabled a cut to signal a lapse of time; such cuts are now "absolutely unnoticeable, so habituated have we become to the change."[26] The

range of stylistic possibilities opened up by the jump cut has generally become foreclosed by a narrowing and hardening of critical categories.

I have not tried in this account to do justice to the complexity of Soviet montage cinema or of Godard's film. Nor do I believe that the dominant critical categories which I have traced out can explain the formal operations of *Storm Over Asia* or *A bout de souffle*. What this survey should indicate, though, is the great degree to which critical recognition of film style has depended upon some prior conception of authorship. That conception is itself historically variable, governed by viewing conventions derived from other arts (e.g., "realism"), from spontaneously accepted political categories ("propaganda"), and from institutionally defined canons of filmmaking, either majority practice (the norms of classical Hollywood cinema) or alternative ones (the norms of Soviet montage or of the art cinema). This is to say that the historical poetics of cinema that will one day exist must situate authors and authorship within changes in film form, institutional practices and critical discourse.

NOTES

[1]This is attempted in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (forthcoming).

[2]I have tried to show how the author's "biographical legend" can affect critical perception of his work in *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1981), pp. 9-24.

[3]For an example of how editing was discussed, see Frederick A. Talbot, *Moving Pictures: How They Are Made and Worked* (London: Neinemann, 1914), pp. 87, 214.

[4]L. Lozowick, "Soviet Cinema," *Theatre Arts* 13 (September 1929), 670.

[5]There are a few exceptions, such as Mordaunt Hall's review, "The End of St. Petersburg", *New York Times*, 31 May 1928, p. 21: "This picture is interesting because of its peculiarly fine conception of camera flashes. Only a few feet, a very few feet, are used in some scenes."

[6]Mordaunt Hall, "An Old Russian Mutiny," *New York Times*, 6 December 1926, p. 28.

[7]Robert Littell, " 'Ten Days That Shook the World,' " *New Republic*, 21 Nov. 1928, p. 17.

[8]"The End of St. Petersburg," *New York Times*, 31 May 1928, p. 21.

[9]A good example is Roger Manvell, *Film* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950), pp. 48-58.

[10]See David Bordwell, "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice." *Film Criticism*, 4 (Fall 1979), 59-64.

[11]Stanley Kauffmann, "Adventures of an Anti-Hero," *New Republic*, 13 Feb. 1961, p. 20.

[12]Dwight MacDonald, *On Movies* (New York: Berkeley, 1969), p. 410.

[13]MacDonald, p. 410.

[14]Arlene Croce, "Breathless," *Film Quarterly*, 14 (Spring 1961), 55.

[15]Gene Moskowitz, "*A bout de souffle* (Out of Breath)," *Variety*, 27 Jan. 1960, p. 6.

[16]Brad Darrach, "Cubistic Cinema," *Time*, 17 Feb. 1961, p. 62.

[17]Kauffmann, p. 20.

[18]Croce, 55.

[19]Penelope Houston, *The Contemporary Cinema* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963), p. 104.

[20]John Russell Taylor, *Cinema Eye, Cinema Ear* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 213; Andrew Sarris, "Waiting for Godard," in Toby Mussman, ed., *Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Dutton, 1968), p. 134; Brad Darrach, "A Love Song," *Time*, 11 Oct. 1963, p. 113.

[21]For other examples, see Pauline Kael, *I Lost It at the Movies* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1965), pp. 127-28; William S. Pechter, *Twenty-Four Times a Second* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 33-34; Karel Reisz and Gavin Millar, *The Technique of Film Editing* (London: Focal Press, 1968), pp. 350-52; and Gordon Gow, "Breathless," *Films and Filming*, 7 (April 1961), 25.

[22]Cited in Fred Baker and Ross Firestone, *Movie People: At Work in the Business of Film* (New York: Lancer, 1973), pp. 163-64.

[23]Ralph Rosenblum and Robert Karen, *When the Shooting Stops . . . The Cutting Begins* (New York: Penguin, 1980), pp. 143-44.

[24]Rosenblum and Karen, p. 144.

[25]For an instance of the broad use of the term, see Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), pp. 219-21.

[26]John Russell Taylor, *Directors and Directions* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1973), pp. 217.

David Bordwell teaches film theory and history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. With Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, he has coauthored *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, forthcoming.